MR Almanac

A Train Story

by George Ridge

A train excursion from Prague to Paris provides the vehicle through which the author of this vignette recollects many of the sweeping changes that have shaken and shaped Europe in this century. While governments and wars have rearranged borders and political philosophies throughout Europe, no one could forever alter the grand geographic and social fabric or quash democratic dreams that endured. While Cold-War scars still mark Eastern Europe, they seem to be fading as the healing process continues.—Editor

I don't know what I expected. At the very least there should have been some minor jolt, some bump or ripple in the steel tracks to impair the otherwise smooth passage of our train. "*Die Grenze* (the border)." With sad eyes, a stranger sitting at my elbow in the dining car whispered the German words. Otherwise I would not have known exactly—to the pinpoint. The stranger made no gesture. His voice was barely audible, as if to hide the location even from the freezing, snow-banked countryside that we hurtled across at 90 miles an hour. The border. Certainly not "just" any border—and not even "any" border, anymore.

Our sleek Eurocity express train No. 96, nicknamed "Goethe," 7 hours and 15 minutes out of Prague, 7 hours and 14 minutes from its Paris destination, had just crossed—without incident—the former Iron Curtain between East and West Germany. Maybe the Goethe isn't the Orient Express, but it is a comfortable, businesslike train that travels from the Czech Republic to Paris almost entirely in daylight. It sets a fine table for dining, although the restaurant car reflects the no-nonsense approach of the modern InterCity expresses—plastic and brass with framed travel posters on the walls. But, with picture windows like these, who needs art?

The broad windows, however, do not simply look onto a peaceful, bucolic present. They also gaze into the whole of this turbulent century. I found myself ticking off history as the wheels beneath me chewed away the miles. Prague 1948. Prague 1968. The Velvet Revolution 1989. The Sudetenland 1938. Dresden 1945. Weimar between the wars. The Iron Curtain 1945-89, RIP. The Rhine River north of Mannheim, where Patton's armies crossed in 1945. The Saarland 1936, Hitler's first conquest. The Maginot Line 1940. Metz and Verdun 1914-1918. Chateau-Theirry and Belleau Wood 1918. The Marne River near Paris 1914.

Nearing the millennium on its now-pedestrian daily journey, the Goethe pries open a cross section of central European events that many of us remember. Compared to the technicolor houses of western Germany, Prague and its environs are still cement gray and, at best, a faded goldenrod color that the coming of the sun lifts marginally from overnight drabness. The sun was at stage right, ready for its entrance cue, as I arrived at Holesovice station for a 6:29 a.m. departure. I had spent less than 24 hours in the Czech capital, but that was enough time to make me realize that even though within a week my feet would be back in America—and the contents of my wallet probably still in Paris—my heart would remain in Prague.

I had last seen this country in the early 1980s when it was called Czechoslovakia and the communists were in control. Far happier memories remained with me as the Goethe pulled away from Holesovice station.

Earlier in the week we were afoot on the snow-dusted outskirts of Pilsen when we interrupted our stroll to study a small granite diptych embossed on one side with a winged figure 8. The lower circle of the figure 8 enclosed a white star set on a background of blue. The star had a red center. This was the insignia of the US 8th Air Force, which had not crossed Czech skies since 1945. The monument contained an inscription in Czech. A single strut of bent aluminum was attached to the main tablet.

An American of Czech heritage translated: "In memory of the American flyers shot down on 25 April 1945." Ten names were listed. Certainly this memorial had not been erected under communist rule. Somebody had concealed a piece of World War II bomber wreckage—and a memory—for more than 40 years.

As we continued our short journey, we heard about the "freedom road" being defined across the western reaches of the Czech Republic by such monuments. Marking the American advance through the former Czechoslovakia, the freedom road ends at a more elaborate memorial slightly east of Pilsen. It was along this line from Karlovy Vary (Carlsbad) in the north to Budweis near the Austrian border that General George S. Patton's Third Army soldiers were ordered to await their Soviet allies and the close of World War II.

"Even during the days of communism, it was a source of great pride among the citizens of Pilsen that they, not Prague, had been liberated by Americans," explained a journalist at the English-language newspaper the *Prague Post*. He said friends in Pilsen had told him that in order to dampen this spirit, the communists told the residents of Pilsen and other Bohemian towns that their liberators were actually "Russians dressed in American uniforms in order to confuse enemy forces."

Memories of the footpaths of Bohemia remained as the train tak-

ing me away from Prague entered the valley of the Elbe River. The silvery waters seemed to wash away some of the industrial blight that the northern Czech Republic has come to endure. Only a dusting of snow saved the land from horizon-to-horizon grayness, a sugar-frosting for the towns that reflect neither industrial prosperity nor worker paradise. (Karl Marx much preferred the spa of Karlsbad—named after another Karl.) In Germany, even in the former East, industrial might is more circumspect. Vineyards cover the facade.

Over a satisfying breakfast of soft-boiled egg served cup-style in the European manner, hard German rolls and coffee, I watched the spires of Dresden emerge. East Germany lives on in the gloom of Dresden. Under its lacy steeples, the city remains a hollow core surrounded by boxy communist apartments. With West German money it will be a showplace in a decade, but for now, the scars remain from a single bombing raid 53 years ago almost to the moment of my leisurely breakfast.

We made two stops in Dresden, and the compartments of the train became noticeably more crowded. The tracks of the first station bridged a pedestrian mall where the life of the station went on in the valley below us. On my last trip to the main station I remember patrolling guards silhouetted against the glass skylights. Today, happily, advertising banners are considered more important than overhead security.

Wintery fields punctuated by a series of atomic cooling towers filled my view until we had passed Leipzig and Weimar. Near Weimar a French salesman in my compartment offered me a glass of Alsatian Riesling reserve. We drank a toast to Napoleon's victory at nearby Jena, but that's another century. From this century, I recognized a former Soviet casern atop a hill near Erfurt.

Soon I discovered where the Riesling came from. The dining car was celebrating Alsatian month with a menu that included lake pike on a bed of mild sauerkraut, Alsatian peasant's stew, called *baeckeoffe* and *bettelmanns* soup, a dessert. Sipping the Riesling with my stew, which also used ample white wine in its preparation, I caught the platinum gleam of the Werra River in the distance. This I knew to be near the border fences, towers and minefields that had held the world on tetherhooks for nearly half a century.

Our train sliced apart the diminished Iron Curtain with more ease than I cut the turnip of my stew. There is nothing to mark our passage. Nothing. No guard towers. Even the naked strips in the forest have been re-grown. Its 15 minutes of fame—actually 44 years—are over.

About the only architectural individuality allowed in the former Czechoslovakia or East Germany seemed to be the garden cottages, where the owners made statements of gingerbread from Grimm's tales, playhouse Bavarian and A-frame. What a contrast, but at the same time a similarity, to Frankfurt's muscular aluminum-paneled skyline. An apartment house wore enormous multicolored dunce caps—an architectural plea for individuality much like the garden cottages.

What a joy it was after Saarbrucken to reach the French railbed—the most cushioned in all of Europe. The temptation was to die with the disappearing rose ball of the sun and wake up in Paris. Even ordinary trains attain speeds of 120 miles an hour in France, so the entire sweep of World War I from Metz to the Marne passed by within 2 1/2 hours. We reached Gare de l'Est in Paris a minute early after more than 800 miles—and, don't forget, the century it took to get there. ***MR***

George Ridge is a restaurant and travel columnist for the Arizona Daily Star *in Tucson, Arizona. He was an editor for the European edition of* Stars and Stripes *in Darmstadt, Germany, from 1955 to 1963.*